

David Jubb's contribution to The Epic and the Intimate, ICA, Thursday 1st July 2010

Chair: Lyn Gardner

Panel: Adrian Howells, Deborah Warner, Dries Verhoeven, Helen Marriage, David Jubb

In preparation for writing a contribution about intimacy for this discussion, I thought it would be worth thinking about an intimate thing that happened to me...this week...to latch on to an intimate theme.

So I had a moment, yesterday evening, thinking about my week: racing around at BAC; running between meetings; snatched conversations in corridors about work; answering several hundred emails; checking my twitter account; writing-up a project management guide for BAC; regularly climbing in to bed at 1am exhausted...I started to panic...finding myself grappling around for a moment of intimacy in my life. With hundreds of interactions with other humans this week, I couldn't identify a genuinely intimate moment. Perhaps this is something worth reflecting upon later, in terms of artists making work that is about one-on-one contact.

Failing to find an intimate moment in my week, I thought I better broaden the timescale. So I started to think about the last decade of my life. It didn't take long for something to spring to mind. It was a moment from the mid 1990's. Now this doesn't look good – but it was an interesting moment that I thought worth sharing.

I was in a train station. I think it was Waterloo. I was arranging to meet up with my girlfriend who was also the mother of my daughter. It was one of the first times we'd both been out of the house at the same time without our daughter so it was kind of exciting. And as I was talking to her on the mobile, a large black brick of Nokia phone which has since been proved as one of the most lethal phones on the market in terms of radiation emissions (so that's something to look forward to later in life)...I saw her. She was across the station, a hundred yards away, walking in my general direction, also with a large black brick pressed to her ear. She saw me and we carried on talking, walking towards each other. With hundreds of people passing both us by. There we were, talking to each other, about what we might do together that evening, her voice, her words, pouring in to my ear, as if her mouth was pressed to my ear, and there she was a hundred yards away, walking towards me, with the world passing by.

It's something that's happened to me a dozen times since with all kinds of different people and I always treasure the moment. There's something about hearing someone's voice, every word, every breath, but them being away from you, in a crowd, seeing you and you seeing them. It is most peculiarly and brilliantly intimate. Because it's something you share, in world full of others, it's something that only you both know about – a secretly public display of privacy.

As I was thinking about the loveliness of those intimate moments, it also struck me that those same kind of public moments of intimacy, can sometimes also be horrid. I remembered something that happened to me this year when I was walking down a street on holiday, no doubt looking a likely prospect, when a man stepped in front of me and raised his shirt to reveal a shiny and impressive looking gun, sitting in the front of his pants. As he raised his shirt I remember seeing a ring pierced in his left nipple and his blue calvin klein underpants. We then worked together to go through my bag,

quite gently, uncovering all the folds in the bag as I did my best to show him everything and anything that he might be interested in. There wasn't much and I remember feeling his disappointment, as he started to ask me whether I had any other pockets or credit cards. I explained that I didn't. I remember other people passing by on the other side of the street and looking over, aware of what was happening and understandably unable to offer any help, and this strange feeling of complicity in a situation that was happening, that was happening to me and not to them. When it became abundantly clear that there really was nothing else to be gained out of the situation, the guy with the gun waved me on and said thank you. I heard myself say thanks back and that was that. I walked on up the road and remember this odd feeling of readjusting to an anonymous street full of people behaving anonymously, so quickly after a strangely intimate encounter full of knowing and understanding.

These two stories remind me, in preparation for the discussion, that intimacy can (and it's obvious to say) be a wonderful and horrid thing. Something we might talk more about later.

I think the challenge with this debate, as with all of its kind, is how you define your terms. Are we all going to be speaking about the same thing? Terms such as immersive, intimate, epic, can all be slippery in the context of trying to find common ground or some kind of shared truth.

For example,

I have had some of the most intimate moments in the theatre in large outdoor spaces with hundreds of other people. When I saw Kneehigh Theatre's *Red Shoes* in Heligan Gardens in 1999, sitting on a hay bale with about 500 other people, the final scene hit me in the solar plexus and touched a very deep part of my upbringing. As I cried, I looked at the person sitting next to me who was crying too. We'd never met. We looked around together and others were in the same state, their children lying asleep around their feet, wrapped in blankets, while their parents wept, and probably promised themselves a series of promises about their child's future.

Alternatively,

I have had some of the most epic experiences inside intimate one-on-one exchanges. In 2008, David Micklem and I experienced Dries Verhoeven's *No Man's Land* in Utrecht. In the performance, we each followed a migrant around the city, walking in to a neighbourhood with a dense migrant population and all the time listening to a story through our headphones of someone who had come to Utrecht to live. The performance ended sitting alone inside a camera obscura, with the image of my guide projected next to me. At the beginning of the performance the audience (about twenty of us) were told to stand in Utrecht railway station in front of the departure board, listening to a beautifully sung opera through headphones. Each of us held up a name card with a foreign name on it. As I looked out in to the crowd at the railway station, many of whom stared back puzzled, I saw a face in the crowd, looking directly in to my eyes, his mouth moving to the words of the opera I was listening to in my headphones. You know those moments in a film where the close up, becomes a middle distance shot, a long shot, a shot of the city you are in, a shot of the county you are in, a shot of the world. This was the epic impact of this fragile and beautifully intimate performance.

So I think it is hard to say one kind of work has greater value than another. That one kind of work is more likely to engender one set of feelings more than another. Perhaps we should focus our debate

on the qualities of great work, regardless of whether it is large scale, small scale, traditional, immersive, intimate, all these labels are only in danger of confusing audiences. One of the reasons that we decided to call BAC's festival the **ONE-ON-ONE Festival** is because it is a "does what it says on the tin" title.

So with that health warning in mind, I will go on to say three short things about intimacy in theatre.

The first is that I think great art generates intimacy. Whether you are listening to a piece of music, looking at a painting on a wall or watching theatre, great art effects you inside. The thought or idea that it inspires in your brain. The feeling or emotion that it enables in your heart or gut. These are all physiological reactions to art, they are inside us, they are intimate. I think great art trades in intimacy. Like religion, it is about letting something inside us, letting something have an effect on us, without catalysing intimacy with its spectator, art struggles to breathe, remaining only an intimate encounter between artist and their work.

When I was growing up what excited me about theatre was that I saw it as the "anything can happen" art form. When I watched a concert and the players picked up the instruments all sitting in neat and expected formation, when I went to a gallery and the paintings or sculptures all sat neatly arranged, it was too easy to have a response of "oh yes, it's one of those" – "oh yes, it's a room full of paintings" - "yes it's an orchestra, they sound quite similar you know" – now I appreciate on one hand that is an ignorant thing to say – but in my eyes as a teenager, theatre presented the opportunity to do absolutely anything. It could include an orchestra or a room full of paintings and then the live interaction between artists and audience could go anywhere. The intimacy was live. It required an incredible pact between artist and audience – a pact of shared intimacy in a space where one did stuff and the other watched. Now of course, the crushing disappointment of the theatre, is that, so often, nothing remarkable happens. And in those circumstances that very same special intimacy can repel audiences – like the way that only the intimacy between family members can somehow drive you mad, theatre seems to manage more than other art form to enrage. Intimacy can drive you wild with excitement or crazy with angst and frustration. I think Channel 4's Peep Show provides the ultimate popular definition of theatre for a televisual age. The two lead characters have been taken to the theatre and are sitting in the back row whispering to each other – "this is hell - he's going to stand there and talk for an hour – and then we have to go out for ten minutes – and then come back in again – and he's going to start talking again - for another whole hour". So whilst theatre trades in intimacy perhaps more than any other art form, there are therefore greater risks when that intimacy is abused.

The second is to look at why more intimate or immersive work is currently being created. I think performance and theatre artists have, since the advent of the mediated image, been trying to re-find the live and the real in performance, decade on decade. In my lifetime, from the actions of Joseph Beuys in the 70's, one in which he famously spent several days in a room with a coyote, Welfare State's landmark *The Raising of the Titanic* in a previous incarnation of LIFT in 1983, to Royale de Luxe beginning to create massive outdoor spectacles in the 90's, to Kneehigh's work under Emma Rice's direction, and Punchdrunk's work hitting new popular heights with audiences, for new theatre in the 21st century. I think the constant theme here is that each artist reinvigorates the live experience. What it means to be in a room, creating art that is alive. I think One-on-one work is

simply the latest effort by artists to grab the live quality of performance by the scruff of the neck, punch its chest and breathe life in to its lungs.

And of course, while theatre has been finding new ways of embracing the live, our day to day experiences become increasingly mediated. I confess that I am a sucker for Britain's Got Talent. I may be the only one in the room. And even when I am crying for the performer who is singing the song for her recently deceased father, I know how manipulated I am - and indeed she is - I am complicit - we are complicit - indeed we are hungry for the emotional quick fix that this kind of television offers. Does all this mediated experience ultimately just drain me of tears? I don't think it does - I think it does connect me to common stories. Whilst One-on-one theatre is the antithesis of millions of people watching Britain's Got Talent, some of the same ethical questions lie at its heart. Who is in control? Is anyone being exploited? And of course the answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. But the idea that this is more likely to happen in one-on-one exchange than in one on a thousand exchange or indeed one on a million exchange seems strange to me. It is interesting that of my friends, the ones who are most nervous about attending **ONE-ON-ONE** or downright refuse, are the ones that go to the theatre. The ones that are most excited about it are the ones that, in general, hate theatre and think of it like the Peep Show boys. My theory on this is that the ones who go to theatre have all witnessed audience participation, they've all seen some exposing of an audience member, or even worse the ritual humiliation of an audience member in front of hundreds of others. The thought of audience participation fills them with horror. It does me too. And yes in One-on-one performance there are pieces that challenge. As in any development in any art form.

The third and final and brief point I want to make is that a greater focus on intimacy or immersiveness or whatever you want to label it as, is also part of a wider movement in theatre towards the participation of audiences. From exploring Punchdrunk's work - to pursuing the Sultan's Elephant in London - to Nick Green's Trilogy this year that built the first ever bridge from the Barbican auditorium to the stage - to Forest Fringe in Edinburgh - to Kneehigh's Asylum to be launched this summer - to One-on-one theatre. I think these all owe a debt to a drive, particularly over the last ten years, in an environment where the arts have been invested in, to democratise the arts and artistic practice - with opportunities for audiences to engage creatively as active participants rather than passive recipients. This does not and should not threaten the traditional intimate relationship between art and spectator - it should just add a layer of complexity that we should celebrate - that a good idea is a good idea - wherever it comes from - artist or audience - that artistic practice will continue to evolve - and rather than one-on-one theatre or other forms of immersive practice being seen as an end in themselves, we should see them as part of a journey to find out what comes next for theatre.